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**The Sinner, The Stranger, The Sacrifice Maker: An Apocryphal  
Autobiography**

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**The Sinner, The Stranger, The Sacrifice Maker: An Apocryphal  
Autobiography**

**by**

**Josef Nicholas Francel, BFA IN PRINTMAKING**

**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to those that have left me and those that I have left behind.

## **Acknowledgements**

I want to thank all the members of my Committee, both past and present, and a special thanks to my chair, Leslie Mutchler, for her tolerance and patience. Extra thanks goes to all those individuals who helped me with my work including Tiffany Guerra, Erin Schwinn, Joshua Orsburn, and the world's best intern, Tsz Kam.

## **Abstract**

# **The Sinner, The Stranger, The Sacrifice Maker: An Apocryphal Autobiography**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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This report serves as a kind of explanation and expansion upon the work I have taken on the past few months. It explores how the concepts of memory and perspective play a role in the narratives that we create. I accomplish this through my work with board games and theatrical recreations. It further discusses the ways in which I address the importance of narrative and story telling through both style and the reinterpretation of my own biography.

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We as people live every day of our lives in a story; the story we tell ourselves, the story we tell others and in the stories of those around us. Each of us has a narrative that we have constructed around ourselves providing us with a particular vantage point, point of view, and perspective. However this can also serve as a barrier by which we keep out those things and ideas that don't fit the narrative that we have established. We are, in essence, our narrative and when our narrative is questioned or corrupted it calls into question our very being and the things we hold to be true. This is why stories are important.



Figure 1: *The Sinner, The Sacrifice Maker, The Stranger*, acrylic on Bristol, 9x6", 2015

Language is one of the most inalienable aspects of what makes us and separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom. With language comes story telling and with the ability to tell stories comes the ability to tell fiction. Fictionalization is an inherent part of

telling a story even if it is a story based completely on reality. Often through the process of narrative, unnecessary elements are deleted and embellishments are added. The process continues when the story is retold over and over and eventually the memory of the actual event no longer exists but is replaced with the memory of the story. Stories evolve and are extremely malleable because they don't exist in a concrete way. This may be self-evident to most people but the understanding of it has, in my mind, important ramifications. Every one of us exists within the narrative we create about our life and this influences how we see and experience the world, and once we have an established narrative and set of beliefs that are based on that narrative, we try to mold each new tale to fit our own story arc. Our interpretations of the world, the lens through which we see things is based entirely on our narratives and we construct a narrative of events, an inherent cause and effect, even when there is no story being dictated. It is essential for us to understand that our stories are self-created and there is no cosmic narrative. We are a pattern seeking species and therefore the structure of the narrative has served us well and has helped us to evolve into who we are today, but this predilection carries with it baggage. Cause and effect, the assumption of understandable patterns, often leads us to the belief in purpose, which, as far as I can tell, is an artifice that we merely project onto the world and is not inherently true.



Figure 2: *The Sacrifice Maker Plays a Game*, digital photograph, 27x36", 2015

“The Stranger” in the title of this body of work is an allusion to the novel by Albert Camus which when I read it years ago, had a dramatic impact on my life. I grew up in a rather religious household, went to a Catholic all boys school, the whole time of which I was exceptionally interested in theology and, for the most part, accepted much of it as a part of reality. However, one aspect of it always troubled me and that was the necessity in Christianity to accept the purpose of the world and by extension our own purpose in it. Despite my interest in religion and what I will for the sake of ease refer to

as my “faith”, I could not deny what I saw around me and that was the complete and utter lack of purpose when I stepped out of my myopic view of my own life and looked at everything as a whole. It was only after reading Camus and eventually abandoning my faith was I able to accept that I was not alone in the realization that the only purpose in life is that which we create ourselves. Beyond that even, our life and our stories are our own and there is no dictator of our destiny. Thus, I create my own purpose; I create a world where all of those things that I once believed can exist, because they exist as fiction. It is a world into which I can attempt to retreat although the real world has a tendency to sneak in and corrupt the fantasy.



Figure 3: *Portrait of the Sinner and the Stranger*, digital photograph, 48x36”, 2015

One subject that I find endlessly fascinating is that of conspiracy theories, not because I believe them, but rather because I am in awe of people who believe in abject nonsense since I too once believed similar silliness. According to a poll conducted by Public Policy Polling in 2013, 37 percent of Americans believe global warming is a hoax, 13 percent believe that Obama is the embodiment of the antichrist, and 4 percent believe in Reptilians (a race of shape shifting aliens that live among us and control the government). These people (presumably for the most part) have jobs, drive cars, and raise children. While in one sense this is extraordinarily frightening, it is in another, insanely interesting, at least to me. The narratives that some people have in their heads as they walk around day-to-day are so profoundly out of touch with reality it is almost unbelievable, but still they exist. I too have a narrative that, while it contains elements plucked from the actual world, is out of touch with the world, but I fabricate my story with full knowledge of its fiction. We all ostensibly have access to much of the same information, however people come to extraordinarily different conclusions based primarily on how well that information fits the story of the world that rattles around in our heads. So while I am interested in storytelling in my work, I am most interested in the way people construct narratives based upon the information (or lack there of) to which they have access. However, there is so much information out there it would be impossible for each person to investigate every minutia of an event or idea, so instead we often have to rely on the narratives that others construct in order to feel informed about a subject. The issue with this becomes a matter of separating the narratives that conform to reality and those that do not.



Figure 4: *A Sacrifice*, digital photograph, 27"x36", 2015

Of all forms of art, photography is often seen as the most “objective” because it is, in theory at least, capturing events as they actually are. However, every photograph has a point of view and what it captures is not necessarily the most true version of reality. I am attempting to illustrate this fact, and by extension demonstrate the fiction of the narrative, by photographing things that are simultaneously three-dimensional and two-dimensional as well as taking pictures of actual people although they are masked and

exist in an absurd manufactured reality. The objects I am photographing are simply illusionistic paintings rendered on a two-dimensional surface that have been cut out, propped up and juxtaposed with one another. Both sets are basically elaborate dioramas and sets that serve as a means by which to tell the narrative. I want my work to be accessible to everyone so the paintings I make are done in a lowbrow cartoon style inspired by the cartoons of Ub Iwerks, the Fleischer brothers, and, of course, Walt Disney. I work in this way because just like I don't believe in ghosts or goblins, I also don't believe the narrative of "high art", it reminds me too much of the religion. The simplicity of the style is juxtaposed with the detailed execution in an attempt to elevate it to something that should be regarded, considered, and with a bit of suspension of disbelief can be seen as real. And while long ago my beliefs separated from my past religious convictions, my interest in it never did, and I draw extensively from medieval religious art and tropes because the imagery of that time was the most basic way to communicate information if the audience has the right context. However, as demonstrated by the lack of consensus amongst scholars, not everything about that imagery is penetrable to today's viewer. For example, in the marginalia of many illuminated manuscripts, there is consistent theme of knights fighting snails, the meaning of which is unknown. I am attracted to this idea of imagery having a very specific meaning but that meaning eludes the viewer.



Figure 5: *Self Portrait as the Sacrifice Maker*, digital photograph, 27.5x36", 2015

With all of this in mind I have set out to construct not a straight forward tale, but rather provide evidence for an event that has occurred and allow the audience to piece together what happened and come to their own conclusions about the story and the meaning behind it. The story that I am telling in actuality is based upon a singular place and time taken from my own life, but this story has been transformed and distorted to the point that is unrecognizable from the original events. People have been replaced with icons, objects have become characters, and the setting has been changed. The actual event served more as an inspiration and jumping off point for the loose story but helps to,



in a way, imbue the tale with meaning for me. It is really a further fictionalization of a memory that is itself a fictionalization of an actuality. By corrupting my narrative in this way, it allows me to confess to my audience these things that I have done and that have happened to me without them being aware of it. Since I can no longer say “Hail Mary”s to absolve myself, I do it through my work; every stroke is an act of penance. That is why this body of work is subtitled “An Apocryphal Autobiography”, I am informing my audience that I am telling a story about me but I am not to be trusted.

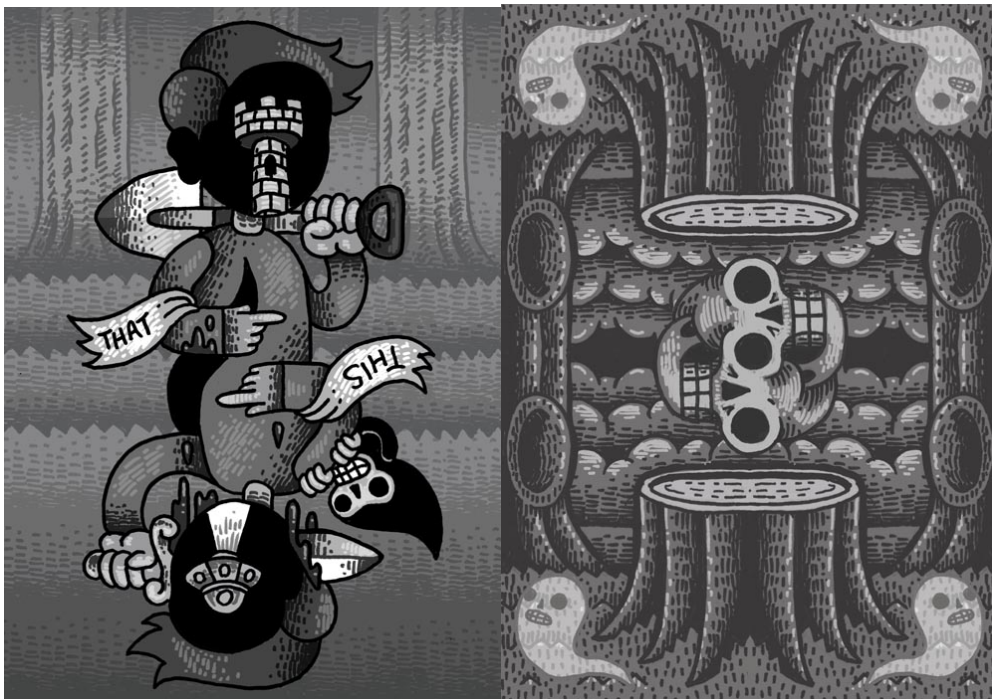


Figure 6: *Card Front (This and That)*, digital drawing, 5x7", 2015 and *Card Back (Severed Trees)*, digital drawing, 5x7", 2015

One of the ways I share this absurd fiction is through the use of game boards and gaming devices. Games are in essence, a microcosm of the real world, one in which the player has access to all of the information. There are rules that the player must learn and from there those rules govern how this small world works. Unlike real life, in which we

don't know all of the rules and don't start the game on equal footing, in games the players often do. Of course this isn't a perfect analogy or applicable to every game, but for me it works as a metaphor. Most importantly though, games have a more visible sense of cause and effect and thus have an inherent narrative even though it may be abstract; there is a beginning and a conclusion and sandwiched in between is the play.



Fig. 7: *Portrait of the Sacrifice Maker and the Stranger*, digital photograph, 48x36", 2015

Another important element that is common in many games is the projection of one self on to a game piece; small pieces of plastic, wood, or metal essentially become an avatar for the person controlling it. These pieces then interact with one another and the universe in which they live. The game pieces are simultaneously the player and the

object, which is acted upon; the player is both god and prophet and becomes a symbol of himself. In nearly every game, through the miniaturization of real things and for ease of understanding, things become symbols. The “king” piece in chess, aside from its crown form, bears no resemblance to a flesh and blood king. It has been abstracted and transformed; it is a short hand, a symbol for power and importance, a symbol for what a king once was. The use of symbols as a form of language is important for me. Much like language, they are things we learn to read to understand the story; do this we must see the pattern they create. Through repetition we presume there is an importance to the symbol, shape, or letter. I use this repetition through the work in order to clue the viewer into the symbols’ importance but deny the viewer the underlying meaning. That being said, much of my symbolism is borrowed and adapted from popular culture, so although subverted, it is anchored in reality.



Figure 8: *Have Faith*, digital photograph, 22x36", 2015

The most interesting thing to me about games though, is the way these man-made distractions have, over time, gained further meaning through the game of telephone method of evolution. Specifically I am thinking of things like Tarot decks and Ouija boards, which in their original incarnations existed as simple games and novelties but through the course of time have gained mystical elements and are games in which a

portion of our population take stock in. This evolution of the narrative relates back to my interest in conspiracy theories and general beliefs.



Figure 9: *Home Sick Home*, digital photograph, 25.5x36", 2015

The elements that I have cannibalized from games is further juxtaposed in the rest of the telling of the story in which these avatars, these characters, are brought back into the flesh and blood world. These characters, through the use of masks and actors, again take on a caricature and obvious allusion to a tale. While it is often taken to the extreme

of credulity, the willing suspension of disbelief is an essential part of a fictional story. Unlike in the reality we exist in, the fictional universe is allowed to have supernatural elements and remain logically consistent because it contains rules that differ from our own but relies on its own internal rational. So in this new fiction, the characters, now orders of magnitude removed from the actual people and things that inspired them, are free to interact with one another by new rules. The most important part of these rules is that they have not been dictated, they are my rules. Instead of trusting one side of the story or another, we are granted a faux omniscience through the camera lens about the events taking place. However, through the fragmentation of the narrative utilizing photography, the viewer is only offered pieces of the story, a snapshot of the events, and must therefore construct the narrative. I view the things I make as artifacts because I believe it is the job of the viewer, like it is of the historian or archaeologist, to find a pattern and narrative with only elements of what happened. Additionally, by viewing these things as artifacts, it connotes that these things are in fact, real, despite their obvious facade.



Figure 10: *The Stranger, The Coward*, digital photograph, 22x36", 2015

Since I am not a master storyteller and perhaps because I lack the imagination, I also rely heavily on pre-established conventions within stories. Not those found within the great novels but rather those found within fairy tales and legends. The stories are simple but because of the simplicity, they have greater room for a diverse understanding of the concept. For example, while the story of Little Red Riding Hood is simple enough for a child to be able to follow, the underlying reasons for the story and the interpretations that can be drawn from it are endless. In addition, by employing these

simple tropes it adds a familiarity to the audience. They aren't presented with a work for which they have no context but a work that is a collage of disparate contexts that is harmonized through the craft of the imagery. While I have in the past tried to make my work more "high brow", I have failed to find any fulfillment in the discussion of bourgeois topics of developed world banality. However, I don't care about the exact meaning of knights fighting snails either. What is important to me is having work that is accessible to as many people as possible that presents a sense, a feeling, about our existence and the confusion of narrative.



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